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**Dimitra Mitta**

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# Reading Platonic Myths from a Ritualistic Point of View: Gyges' Ring and the Cave Allegory

**A.** Plato defined myths as "fictional tales" that fill gaps of our knowledge of the past (*Republic*, 382d). This definition does not exclude a historical background, historical facts and actual persons, whose realistic and secular character becomes increasingly faint, religious and mysterious, yet still echoes in our memory. Although in *Phaedrus* (275a-b) Plato proves the priority and truth of the oral as opposed to the written word, although mythology is oral, an act of speech that cultivates memory, ἀλήθεια [thruth] means lack of oblivion, a memory achieved through internal (ἔνδοθεν αὐτοὺς ὑφ' αὐτῶν) rather than external (ἔξωθεν ὑπ' ἀλλοτρίων τύπων) means[1], he still banishes poetry, the carrier of myth, and art in general from his ideal *Republic* or accepts them only under certain prerequisite conditions. In any case, Plato uses myths (traditional or "first appearing") to complement his strictly philosophical truths – but never as autonomous entities or equal to them – simply to enhance his arguments with aesthetic power. The philosopher imitated the charming vestment of ancient philosophy or mythology and composed myths in the old-fashioned manner and in accordance to the images of his "national" poets, to present those of his ideas that are based on knowledge that is not absolutely pure. Such "mythical philosopheme" – the term was coined by German philosopher Schelling[2] – could be considered as a deviation from a philosophical exposition per se.

Still, if Plato valorised the potential of myth – an issue that has been researched both at a general and theoretical level as well as within particular mythical narratives

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[1] In a past paper we quoted the view expressed by Luciano Nanni, Professor at the University of Bologna, who, on the basis of the text of Phaedrus, defines myth as an experience that cultivates communication as opposed to the written word, which he calls the art of non-communication. We had also expressed the view that mythology is an experience without a subject, which is transmitted through the narrative continuity of a collective subject, not exactly related to individual subjects, thus indicating a point of in-difference between subject and object, "an equal-archetype before they were differentiated". This is a process where the subject is found within the action achieved, while the object refers to the subject itself. In other words, we would be talking about an "objective subjectivity", in essence, a process that is intransitive rather than transitive, since the object is not external in relation to the subject, which is inherent and concurrent with the object. The difference between the subject and the object is and is not a difference, is and is not transition; what it is is passion and energy (D. Mitta, *Απολογία για τον Μύθο*, Thessaloniki, University Studio Press, 1997, p. 248).

[2] Schellings, *Werke* I, 72 (hrsg. von M. Schröter, München, 1927-1954). The term *philosopheme* was used by other philosophers of German Romanticism, such as Heyne, Fr. Creuzer, etc, meaning the essence of convictions and knowledge of ancient peoples. However, the latter limited the concept to the religious convictions of a people and that is why he considered words like "theologoumena" or "divine myths" more appropriate for this kind of knowledge (Fr. Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker besondrs der Griechen* I, chap. III [Leipzig/Darmstadt, 1819-1823]).

in his philosophical texts[3] – we believe that in the same manner he incorporated his knowledge of dramatic rituals. Both myths and worshipping practices were well known to both those who believed or were sceptical about the religious traditions of the time. References to such practices that can be detected in Plato's texts open a field for research. Our attempt here is not exhaustive but, rather, exploratory, placing special emphasis on two points from the *Republic*: Gyges' ring and the cave allegory.

**B.** In "Gyges' ring" (*Republic*, 359b-360b), Glaucon presents the views of his class on justice; he supports that justice is not an inherent virtue in man, nor a matter of free choice but, rather, the result of a "social contract". Provided a person behaves justly, they avoid punishment; if, however, one has the opportunity to be unfair without any consequences, then they unblushingly do wrong. In order to persuade his listeners, Glaucon resorts to myth (359d):

> He [the ancestor of Gyges the Lydian] was a shepherd in the service of the ruler at that time of Lydia, [...] after a great deluge of rain and an earthquake the ground opened and a chasm appeared in the place where he was pasturing; [...] he saw and wondered and went down into the chasm; and the story goes that he beheld other marvels there and a hollow bronze horse with little doors and that he peeped in and saw a corpse within, as it seemed, of more than mortal stature, and that there was nothing else but a gold ring on its hand, which he took and went forth.[4]

Why does Glaucon use this specific narrative? The myth is not a "traditional" one, yet has elements from traditional and religious views. How much did listeners recognise?

1. An older governing system, where animal breeding was of such special importance for the economy that a good ruler was compared to a good shepherd. In mythology gods appear as owners of animals, formidable punishers of thieves (Apollo, Hermes, Sun), reflecting a central government at the human level, a system with organised economy, administration and army. Within such a system, the king has numerous capacities (administrative, military, financial, diplomatic) and protects his people, who, of course, play no part in decision making.

2. The formulated concepts concerning the way people communicated with the underworld, according to which, rifts on the ground, caves, deep gorges, lakes and rivers that often disappear into the depths of the earth were such means of communication. In this sense of being in contact with the forces of the underworld, Gyges is charismatic and favoured by the gods.

3. The unusual dimensions of the dead who echo of heroes of the distant past and were considered huge, e.g. Talos, "the golden generation of the short-lived

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[3] Indicatively, some relevant works are the following: L. COUTOURAT, *De platonicis mythis*, Paris, 1896; P. FRUTIGER, *Les mythes de Platon*, Paris, 1930; P.M. SCHUHL, *La fabulation platonicienne*, Paris, 1947; L. BRISSON, *Les mots et les mythes*, Paris, 1982; G.E.R. LLOYD, "Plato on mathematics and nature, myth and science", in *Methods and Problems in Greek Science*, Cambridge, 1991. – As for the investigation of specific myths, especially that of Atlantis (Plato, *Timaeus*, 24e-25b; *Critias*, 112e-121c), see V. KALPHAS, *Πλάτων. Τίμαιος*, Athens, 1995; J. MOREAU, *Timée*, Paris, La Pléiade, 1950; E.S. RAMAGE, *Atlantis: Fact or Fiction*, Bloomington Indiana, 1978; L. TARAN, "The creation myth in Plato's Timaeus", in J.P. ANTON, G. KUSTAS, *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Albany, 1971, p. 372-407; W. WELLIVER, *Character, Plot and Thought in Plato's Timaeus*, Leiden, 1971.

[4] Plato, *The Republic*. Transl. by Paul Shorey, The Loeb Classical Library, 1954.

humans" (χρύσεον μὲν πρώτιστα γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων)[5], or the residents of utopian island cities[6].

4. The golden ring symbolising the sun disc and indicating wealth and royal power (the dead, whose grave was revealed to Gyges, presented him with wealth and royal power through this ring). Athenians also knew the importance of finding a ring from a local myth concerning their own hero, Theseus, the son of Poseidon[7].

5. The horse on the grave of the dead. The horse had been associated with the underworld since early antiquity, either in relation to one of the underworld gods or independently as a death demon that could only temporarily be tamed by mortal heroes (Bellerophon, Adrastus), who, however, were later led to their death by these very horses. Even Phaethon steering the Sun's chariot lost control of the horses, which plunged him to his death. These myths were a very good vehicle to show the temporariness of man's domination over death[8].

6. Gods who were connected with the horse, mainly in a parental manner, were the two well known deities to Athenians, those who competed for domination over Athens: Poseidon[9] and Athena[10].

7. Moreover, the description of the horse, which brings to mind the well-known image from the neck of the jar of Mykonos (c. 675 BC) found among the artefacts of a tomb. The artist has created a relief image of the wooden horse, a cavity with little windows – a total of seven – on the neck and sides of the jar. The head of a warrior comes out from each one of the windows.

8. Plato's listeners were also aware of the fact that the horse was not so much a symbol of economic life, but denoted social class and financial power and reflected a specific social structure and a divine world of the same structure, which protected certain values.

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5 HESIOD, *W & D*, 109.

6 DIOD. SIC., II, 55-60; LUCIAN, *True Story*, 1, 3.

7 BACCHYLIDES, *Ode* 17, 52-128.

8 This is why horses are often found inside tombs or as an epitaphial decoration, while on vase illustrations, as early as the geometrical period, they accompany the funereal procession (e.g. on Dipylon amphora). In tomb no. 15 of Kerameikus, a child's tomb, an 8th century compass with ceramic horses on the cover was found. K. SOUEREF notes: "Researchers have not reached a conclusion as to whether small horses found in children's graves have a religious or social symbolism or are mere decorative toys." His view is that the horse is a social class symbol ("Ιδεολογικά στοιχεία της αρχαίας ελληνικής τέχνης", in A. PAPAGIANNOPOULOU, D. PLANTZOS, K. SOUEREF [eds.], *Τέχνες Ι· Ελληνικές Εικαστικές Τέχνες*. Vol. 1: *Προϊστορική και Κλασική Τέχνη*, Patras, 1999, p. 148).

9 About Poseidon Hippios, see J.-P. VERNANT, M. DETIENNE, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La mètis grecque*, Paris, 1974, p. 176-200.

10 The Achaeans dedicated the wooden horse of Troy to Athena ("Ελληνες 'Αθηνᾷ χαριστήριον). She showed Bellerophon how to tame Pegasus, the winged horse, which was a son of Poseidon (PIND., *Ol.* 13, 63). The hero then made a sacrifice to thank Gaieochos and Athena Hippia a pair worshipped in many parts of Greece. The two of them together were patron deities of horses at Hippios Colonus. Of course, the variation that wants Poseidon taming the horse (SOPH., *Oed. C.*, 714-715) and offering the domination of the sea to Athena is an Attic version and rather a concession to the god defeated in the contest with Athena, so that they could appease him in his wrath. On the other hand, if Poseidon prevailed in the sea, the building of the first ship, Argo, was attributed to Athena's intelligence.

9. Glaucon refashions a well-known story by Herodotus[11].

Therefore, we could assume that Glaucon uses patterns and motifs that are known to and accepted by his listeners in order to prove his views – when man has the opportunity, he proves that he is unjust by nature; Plato's own views are indicated as a ramification of those expressed by Glaucon.

**C.** Well known to and accepted by his listeners are the patterns and motifs used by Plato in the cave allegory as well (*Republic*, 514a – 520e). Let us just underline some point in the narrative:

1. The whole story is unfolding inside a cave (ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκήσει σπηλαιώδει, 514a), within an opening of the earth, just like in the case of Gyges; this is a place where the two worlds, the one above and the one below, meet, it is a marginal region.

2. The ascent from the cave to the outside world usually follows a difficult, rough road uphill. The same way has to be followed downwards by anyone who might want to return to the cave and share the truth with other prisoners (516a).

3. The ascent is undertaken with outside help (516a).

4. What prisoners saw were the shadows of real creatures (515c-d).

5. Within the cave there are "constructions" like those of miracle makers (illusionists), used to perform their "illusions" (514b – 515a).

6. The ascent to the world above is a spiritual trip from the world of appearances to the real world of ideas (515d).

How familiar were all these to Athenian citizens? Our view is that the topography of the cave and what took place there evoked to memory the topography of Hades, rituals that used to take place in caves, well-known myths concerning descents to the underworld. More specifically:

1. At least six descents of living heroes to the underworld were known to the Athenians from mythology, those of: Theseus and Pirithus the Lapith, Heracles, Orpheus, Alcestis (Euripides' tragedy of the same name was probably performed in 438 B.C.), Dionysus, who went to the Hades and brought his mother, Semeli, up (ἀνήγαγε), Dionysus with Xanthias in the *Frogs* by Aristophanes, which was performed in 405 B.C. (it should be noted that the *Republic* must have been

[11] HERODOTUS, I, 8-13. Of course, there are important differences between the two stories. A) Content differences: 1) Herodotus' Gyges is an ancestor of Croesus, whereas Plato's Gyges is an ancestor or Herodotus' hero. 2) In both the historian's and the philosopher's narratives Gyges ascends to the royal throne through the king's wife, after he has killed her husband. However, in the first case (Herodotus), Gyges is the commander of the royal guards who is forced by circumstances to drag himself in their wake to avoid the death penalty (Candaulis' wife, insulted by her husband's conduct, in asking Gyges to secretly watch and admire her beauty, demanded from Gyges, whom she noticed, to kill her husband, otherwise she would punish Gyges with death). In the second case (Plato), Gyges is a shepherd with full control of his choices, who can take initiatives and is, therefore, responsible for his actions. B) Structure differences: Herodotus' narrative becomes dramatic with the inclusion of dialogue, while it has all the features of a novella, i.e. a narrative with heroes, a plot, various incidents and unexpected turns. In the Platonic version, persons merely appear, without any character depth and no dialogue; so readers are called upon to reconstruct the dialogue for themselves. It is obvious that what is important is not the plot itself or the historical event but the fact that the plot becomes the vehicle for a message not included in the initial narrative.

completed around 374 B.C.). The descent is usually described as a difficult adventure and the place is dark and often filthy (*Frogs*, 273). The dead are described as shadows. When, for example, Heracles is preparing to attack Gorge, Meleager's sister, as if she were alive, Hermes holds him back and tells him that the figures of the dead were only shadows. Euridice, also, was to maintain "the terrible, eerie features of the beings of the underworld until she was surrounded by sunlight"[12]. Furthermore, the living accompany the dead on their way back to the upper world – Heracles accompanies Theseus and Alcestis, Orpheus Euridice, Dionysus Semeli and Dionysus, again, Aeschylus. Similarly, those who become conscious of the truth will lead cave prisoners to the sunlight. Finally, Cerberus, unaccustomed as it was to sunlight, was blinded by its brilliance and spat out bile. In the same manner, prisoners are so bedazzled by truth that they want to return to the cave, considering what they see untrue.

2. In representational art the opening of the underworld is also depicted as a cave. Besides, caves were places of worship, mostly dedicated to the forces of darkness.

3. Homer's tradition, as well as other ancient texts and archaeological finds, lead to the postulation that in the cave allegory Plato uses broadely accepted notions about death; what is described here is a *nekyiomanteion* (Oracle of the Dead) and the ascent of the prisoner upward, to the world of truth, is the reverse of the route the pious followed after special preparation with the help of priests, from the world of the living to the world of the dead, from the world of light to the world of darkness, where one embraced the dark forces, in an attempt to get to know the future and purify one's soul.

Well known oracles of this kind were that of Poseidon at Cape Tenaron, whose cave was considered a point of "descending" to Hades[13], at Cumae in Italy, which was visited by Aeneas[14], at Hermione in Argolis, at Heracleia in Pontos, at the river Acheron in Thesprotia, near Ephyra (the oldest and most famous oracle of the dead, where Ulysses sacrificed animals to the dead with his mates so that he could learn from Tiresias how he was going to return to Ithaca)[15], at Coroneia in Boeotia, at Trophonius in Lebadea, etc.

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[12] I. Kakridis, *Ελληνική Μυθολογία*. III. *Οι Ήρωες*, Athens, 1986, p. 294.

[13] This is where the myth of Heracles' descent to Hades is placed. That is when the hero brought to the world-above Cerberus or even Pluton himself. As for Poseidon at Tainaron, see N.D. Papachatzis, "Ποσειδών Ταινάριος", *AEph* (1976) [1977], p. 102-135.

[14] As for the necromancy oracle in Cumae, see L. Breglia Pulci Doria, "I Cimmeri a Cuma", in M. Bats, B. D'Agostino (eds.), *Euboica. L'Eubea e la presenza euboica in Chalcidica e in Occidente*. Atti del Convegno Interazionale di Napoli 13-16 Novembre 1996, Napoli, 1998, p. 323-335 and L. Antonelli, "Aristodemo μαλακός e la dea dell'averno. Per una storia del culto il νεκυομαντεῖον in terrritorio cummano", *Hesperia. Studi sulla Grecità di Occidenti* 4 (1994), p. 97-121.

[15] *Od.* XI, 511-543; Her., V, 92; Luc., *Menippus*, 7-10; Paus., I, 17, 5; IX, 30, 6. The archaeologist S. Dakaris, taking into account Homer's tradition, the topography of western Epirus in the prefecture of Preveza, on the north bank of the Acheron river, the place names and archaeological finds of the region, identifies it as the region with 'Αΐδαου δόμους καὶ ἐπαινῆς Περσεφονείης (*Od.* X, 488) : *The Nekyomanteion of the Acheron*, Transl. by W.W. Phelps, Athens, 1993). Dakaris' views have been under discussion and it has been disputed by D. Baatz whether the Hellenistic Oracle of the Dead he excavated was truly an oracle or a farm fortification tower ("Teile hellenistischer Geschütze aus Griechenland", *AA* 94 [1979], p. 68-75, and "Hellenistische Katapulte aus Ephyra (Epirus)", *MDAI(A)* 97 [1982], p. 211-233). The answer to Baatz was given by Dakaris himself ("Οδύσσεια και 'Ηπειρος", in *Ιλιάδα και Οδύσσεια. Μύθος και Ιστορία*. Πρακτικά του Δ' Συνεδρίου για την

Had Plato visited oracles of the dead (*nekyiomanteia*)? This is not at all improbable for such a well-travelled man. Of course, all he needed know was *Odyssey*, e.g., concerning the *nekyiomantion* on the River Acheron or *Telegony*, Pindar and Attic drama, if we are referring to that at Trophonius in Boeotia, which existed by the sixth century.

As for the kind rituals these were and their association with the cave allegory, let us indicatively refer to what used to go on at Trophonius oracle, as described by Pausanias:

> The procedure of the **descent** is this. First, during the night he is taken to the river Hercyna by two boys of the citizens [...] After this he is taken by the priests, not at once to the oracle, but to fountains of water very near to each other. Here he must drink water called the water of **Forgetfulness**, that he may forget all that he has been thinking of hitherto, and afterwards he drinks of another water, the water of **Memory**[16], which causes him to remember what he sees after his **descent**. [...] The oracle is on the mountain, beyond the grove. [...] Within the enclosure is a **chasm in the earth**, not natural, but artificially constructed after the most accurate masonry. [...] They have made no way of **descent** to the bottom, but when a man comes to Trophonius, they bring him a narrow, light ladder. After going down he finds a hole between the floor and the structure· [...] The **descender** lies with his back on the ground, [...] thrusts his feet into the hole and himself follows, trying hard to get his knees into the hole. [...].[17] After this those who have entered the shrine learn the future, **not in one and the same way in all cases, but by sight sometimes and at other times by hearing**. The **return upwards** is by the same mouth [...]. After his **ascent** from Trophonius the inquirer is again taken in hand by the priests, who set him upon a chair called the chair of **Memory**, which stands not far from the shrine, and they ask of him, when seated there, all he has seen or learned. After **gaining this information** they then entrust him to his relatives. These lift him, paralysed with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings, and carry him to the

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Οδύσσεια (9-15 Σεπτ. 1984), Ithaka, 1986, p. 141-170, here p. 152. These views were discussed in a critical manner by the geographer É. Fouache and the historian Fr. Quantin, who claimed that no source refers to a temple or sanctuary at the Acheron river in Thesprotia region and that archaeological and geographical data do not document Dakaris' views; they identified the Nedas river in the Peloponnese as the most possible point of descent to the Hades – as referred to in Homeric texts – and attributed the idea of placing the point of descent to the Hades at the Acheron river as a colonial extremity ("Représentations et réalité géographique de l'entrée des enfers de Thesprotie", in Ch. CUSSET (éd.), *La nature et ses représentations dans l'Antiquité*, Actes du colloque de l'E.N.S. Fontenay - Saint-Cloud [24-25 oct. 1996], Paris, 1999, p. 29-61). The issue seems to be open, as more recently researchers tend to support Dakaris' views. On the same issue, see also: N.G.L. HUXLEY, "Odysseus and the Thesprotian oracle of the dead", *PP* 13 (1958), p. 245-248; N. HAMMOND, *Epirus*, Oxford, 1967; R. HÄGG, "Mykenische Kultotäffen im archäologischen Material", *OAth* 8 (1968), p. 39-59; Chr. TZOUVARA-SOULI, Η λατρεία των γυναικείων θεοτήτων εις την Αρχαίαν Ήπειρον Συμβολή εις την μελέτην της θρησκείας των αρχαίων Ηπειρωτών, Ioannina, 1979, p. 99-110; C. SOUEREF, "Presupposti della colonizzazione lungo le coste epirote", in P. CABANES (ed.), *L'Illyrie méridionale et l'Épire dans l'antiquité* II. Actes du II[e] colloque intern. de Clermont Ferrand (25-27 oct. 1990), Paris, 1993, p. 29-46; *id.*, "Indicazioni circa attività marittime lungo le coste epirote, durante la tarda età del bronzo", *ΤΡΟΠΙΣ* 3 (1995), p. 401-416; *id.*, "Πρώιμες λατρείες στο Βόρειο Ιόνιο Πέλαγος σχετικές με τη ναυσιπλοΐα", *ΤΡΟΠΙΣ* 4 (1996), p. 451-460, here p. 454.

[16] See PLATO, *Rep.*, 621a and onwards.

[17] For an architectural representation of the site, see V. ROSENBERGER, *Griechische Orakel. Eine Kulturgeschichte*, Darmstadt, 2001, p. 38.

> building where he lodged before with Good Fortune and the Good Spirit. Afterwards, however, he will recover all his faculties, and the power of laugh will return to him[18].

The following points are underlined in the narrative:

1. In the **impenetrable darkness**, the pilgrims underwent spiritual and physical preparation, to lead them away from everyday reality.

2. The *katabasis* into the cave induced the illusion that the person was wandering through the dark, crooked streets of Hades.

3. Just like the dead, the person went under the earth, both alive and prepared, in a state of confused consciousness, in order to experience unusual events or be led to believe that such events were experienced.

4. Pilgrims learnt about the future through things they saw or heard.

5. The pilgrim entered the oracle together with a priest-guide.

6. Ascent followed the same route.

7. In a state of confusion the pilgrim revealed to the priests what had been seen or heard or what s/he believed had been seen or heard.

8. Gradually pilgrims regained consciousness as to who and where they were and were returned to the community.[19]

What are the common features with Plato's narratives and what broader views on the underworld does this latest one reflect?

1. Prisoners remind us of the souls of the dead who are similar to shadows (εἴδωλα καμόντων) without consciousness (νεκύων ἀμενηνά κάρηνα, *Od.* X, 49).

2. They live in a cave, just like the gods of the underworld lived in a subterranean hall and the dead under the earth.

3. The ascent will take place with the help of an expert-philosopher, just like the priest was an expert leading the pious through the maze.

4. The prisoners of Plato's cave and the pious of the νεκυομαντεῖον, see sights and hear sounds.

> See also, then, men carrying past the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and other silent.[20]

And further on:

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[18] Pausanias, IX, 39, 4-5. Transl. by W.H.S. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library, 1965. The consultant's experience in the Trophonius is also described by Plutarch, *The Daimonion of Socrates*, 21-22 (*Mor.*, 590b-592f). For the Trophonion, see P. Bonnechere, "Mantique, transe et phénomènes physiques à Lébadée : entre rationnel et irrationnel en Grèce et dans la pensée moderne", *Kernos* 15 (2002), p. 179-186, and Y. Ustinova, "'Either a Daimon, or a Hero, or Perhaps a God:' Mythical Residents of Subterranean Chambers", *ibid.*, p. 267-288, mainly p. 269-274, where there is a wealth of references to this issue. I am very grateful to Dr. Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge for having kindly sent to me copies of both works, because the journal had not circulated yet.

[19] This process is reminiscent of the way in which Cadmus brought Agave back from her mania state and returned her to reality and the truth of her own actions (Eur., *Bacch.*, 1233-1297).

[20] Plato, *Rep.*, 515a. Transl. by Paul Shorey.

> And if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else then the passing shadow to be the speaker?[21]

Similarly, this is what Pausanias has to say:

> [...] those who have entered the shrine learn the future, not in one and the same way in all cases, but by sight sometimes and at other times by hearing.[22]

Pausanias does not clarify what the pilgrim sees or hears. What is certain, however, is that a person in a state of confused consciousness might well believe that they saw or heard anything, while we cannot exclude the use of lifting devices, with the help of which fabricated images of the dead could be made to appear and converse with the consultants; this is similar to the dramatic *deus ex machina* and "constructions" within the cave, similar to the constructions of "illusionists" or "miracle makers" referred to by Plato.[23]

5. After the ascent, the pilgrim, "paralysed with fear, having no consciousness of self and the surroundings", revealed to the priests what had been seen and heard.

6. The pilgrim had to go through a purification ceremony in order to acquire consciousness.

7. Afterwards the prilgrim had to leave and never talk about what had been seen and heard, just like Alcestis in the tragedy bearing her name. What should the prisoner of Plato's cave do once he has gone up and seen things in the sunlight? Go down again and break the "sacred" silence, talk and reveal the truth, rather than rest content with having acquired his individual truth (519d). How easy was this? As easy as it would be for someone to convince a person prepared to see the shadows of the dead that it was all a fraud. That "easy" and that safe. Plato knew about difficulty from the experience of Socrates, his tutor.

For Plato the cave represents the world of the senses which can deceive. Those inhabiting it are similar to the souls of the dead that are similar to shadows, with superhuman powers, yet without consciousness. On the contrary, the world that is lit by the sun represents the realm of ideas, the truth that can be approached through reason rather than through tricks. In other words, this is the exact opposite of what is happening at the oracles of dead, for example at Cumae:

> And those who live about the oracle have an ancestral custom, that no one should see the sun, but should go outside the caverns only during the night; and it is for this reason that the poet speaks of them as follows: "**And never does the shining sun look upon them"; but later on the Cimmerians were destroyed by a certain**

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[21] *Ibid.*, 515b.

[22] PAUS., IX, 39, 5.

[23] DAKARIS (*The Nekyomanteion*, *o.c.* [n. 15], p. 22) in the building of the 3rd century B.C., excavated by him on the north bank of the Acheron river, in the prefecture of Preveza, recognized a central hall, which, according to many other finds, has been called the hall of apparitions. The excavator assumes concealed passages, "through which the priests could move unobserved" and a lifting device, with the help of which "fabricated images of the dead could be made to appear and converse with the consultants".

**king**, because the response of the oracle did not turn out in his favour; the seat of the oracle, however, still endures, although it has been removed to another place.[24]

If we changed Strabo's words slightly, says ὕστερον δὲ διαφθαρῆναι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ὑπὸ βασιλέως φιλοσόφου ("the Cimmerians were destroyed by a certain king philosopher"), using διαφθαρῆναι ("destroyed") as an euphemism and meaning the enlightenment of people, their coming away from the world of shadows and the senses and their entering the world of light and ideas, would we not be very close to Plato's philosophy?

What is the conclusion of all this? We believe that beyond myths, Plato also used other schemes from the world of religion to complement his reasoning and dialectics. These were familiar to his listeners and students and through them he often succeeded in transcending what was generally accepted and present his own proposal.

Let us finally add that Plato allowed the poet and myth-maker to enter his Republic, provided they both used their craft to serve the Republic. In other words, he was the first to propose the use of art and myth to serve a specific ideology, obviously considering himself as the one who first taught this idea. We can similarly assume that he would allow enlightened priests and mystics to enter his Republic, provided they would use their religious qualifications as a means of initiation into the philosophy of ideas. Or, to put it another way, what Plato finally achieved was to transcend religious reality, which he appears to have known very well, almost as if an initiated believer, through religious means.

Dimitra MITTA

9 Tyrteus
GR – 54634 THESSALONIKI
*e-mail: mitta@tee.gr*

[24] STRABO, V, 4, 5. Transl. by H.L. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library, 1969.